

22nd Sunday Ordinary Time
August 29, 2010
Fr. Tom Elliott

New Covenant People

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29
Psalm 68
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a
Luke 14:1, 7-14

When I was growing up, my parents did not allow me or my siblings to drink Coke during mealtimes. In fact, we rarely got to drink sodas at all. Instead, we were given milk during meals and generic Kool-Aid throughout the day. When I left home for college, I rebelled against my parents' rules... I drank Coke at every meal. I was a wild man... out of control... I went weeks without milk! Then I realized—I love milk! I began to drink milk at all my meals again, not because it was a rule that I had to follow, but because I like it and it was good for me.

Good parents have rules for their children. However, there comes a time when the children need to move from being young children to adult children. This transition is marked by the rules becoming internalized and personalized. This is precisely what we see happening to the children of Israel throughout Biblical history.

The Old Testament is marked with a lot of rules. It reflects a very young and new relationship with God, the Father. However, as the history of salvation progressed, so did that relationship. Eventually, God's People were, as a whole, no longer spiritually "young children," but they had matured to spiritual adulthood. This transition is ultimately marked by the coming of Christ. A fundamental shift occurred in humanity's relationship with God the Father. We moved from being an Old Covenant people—immature, rebellious, needing lots of rules—to a New Covenant people—mature, obedient, and directed by the Spirit of God within us.

A person living under the Old Testament Covenant was required to follow the Ten Commandments.¹ The Ten Commandments were the core of the Old Covenant. In addition, the Old Covenant involved keeping the various laws described in the Book of Exodus chapters 20-23. This Covenant included men being circumcised and people offering up burnt offerings of grains and slaughtered animals. Eventually, Jewish law morphed into a set of 613 rules to follow in order to maintain one's relationship with God. For most ordinary Jews living in the time of Christ, these rules were a burden, not a help. Jesus testified to this when He said, "Woe also to you scholars of the law! You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them" (Luke 11:46).

It's important for us to remember that the Old Covenant was not a *bad thing*—it was *precisely* what God's Chosen People needed in the infancy of their relationship with God. However, God did not keep them there. As the centuries went by, God challenged them more and more to live their faith, not by simply following laws, but by following His Spirit in their hearts. The Book of Ezekiel, chapter thirty-six testifies to this movement beautifully. God spoke to His people, saying—

¹ Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13

I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees.

-Ezekiel 36:26-27

In other words, God's law would no longer be something written on tablets of stone, but intimately inscribed upon His People's hearts. God stated this explicitly through the prophet Jeremiah, saying—

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

-Jeremiah 31:31, 33b

Our second reading today, from the letter to the Hebrews, explains that the fullness of God's promise, spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "the mediator of a new covenant" (Hebrews 12:24a). Scripture scholars tell us that the letter to the Hebrews was originally not a *letter*, but rather, a *homily* preached to Jewish Christians to encourage them in their faith. It is obvious from the content of the homily, that many of the Jewish Christians had grown weary in living their faith. They were being stretched by God to live from a deeper place of love. God was calling them out of Christian childhood and into Christian adulthood. In order to live at that new depth of love and faith, they needed to be reminded that they were New Covenant people—no longer bound by rules, like young children, but directed by the very Spirit of their Father, like adult children.

You and I are also called to live a New Covenant people! What exactly does that mean? At the risk of oversimplifying things, I suggest that being people of the New Covenant ultimately means uniting our lives with Christ—who is Himself, the incarnation of the New Covenant. This is mainly done through—

- Being baptized in the life of Christ
- Participating in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist (the "Blood of the new and everlasting Covenant"), which continue to nurture Christ's life within us.
- Constantly remembering that through Christ we are loved sinners, cherished by God.
- Knowing God's law and the spirit of the law and choosing to live it as a free response of love, not obligation.
- Offering ourselves—our prayer, pain, time, talent, treasure, our very lives—as a sacrificial offering of love to God.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ When did your faith in Jesus Christ and your practice of Catholicism become *your personal choice* and not simply obedience to someone else's request or demand?
- ✚ What does it mean to you, personally, to be a New Covenant person? How does the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ change who you are?